

**J.TUGENDHOLD**  
**ALEXANDRA**  
**EXTER**

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**SARJA**

**1922**

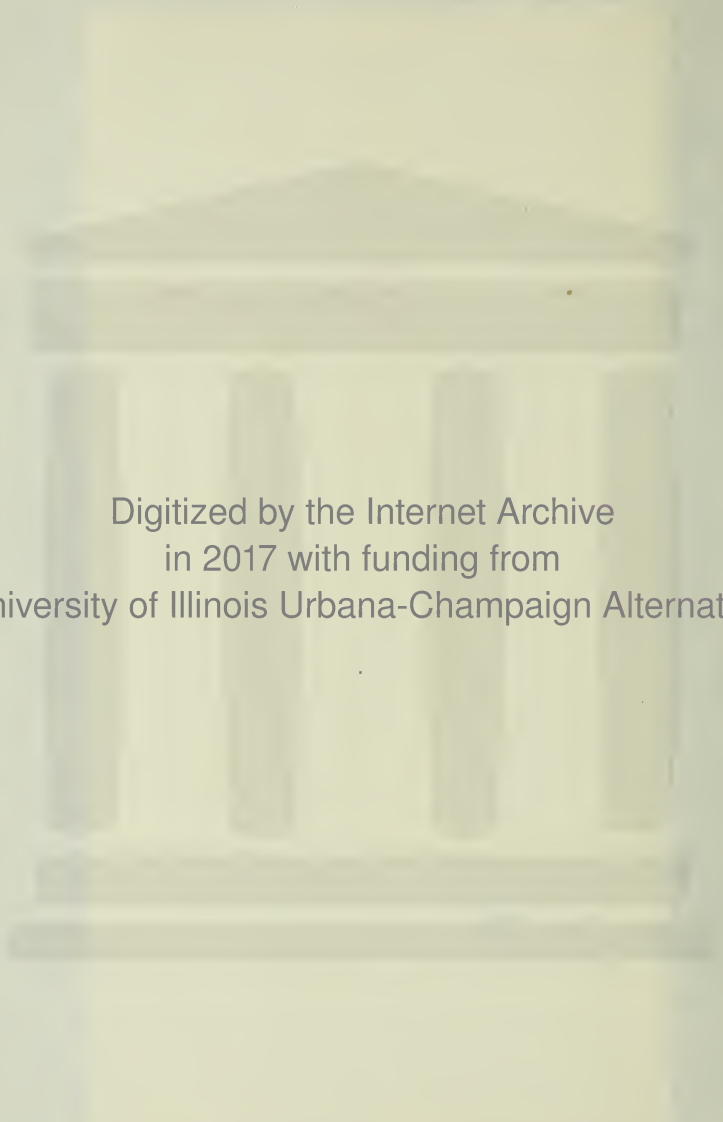


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J. TUGENDHOLD

# ALEXANDRA EXTER

TRANSLATION BY  
COUNT PETROVSKY-PETROVO-SOLOVOVO

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"SARJA" EDITION 1922





759.9  
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La pittura è cosa mentale.

Leonardo da Vinci

Il faut être ouvrier dans son art, savoir de bonne heure sa méthode de réalisation. Être peintre par les qualités mêmes de la peinture, se servir de matériaux grossiers.

Paul Cézanne



Bridge (Sèvres)

## TUGENDHOLD: ALEXANDRA EXTER

**I**n contemporary Russian painting of the so-called "left" tendency the artist Alexandra Exter occupies her own peculiar position. Such a position has become hers not through bluff and tricks with which youthful artists of every country have to "épater le bourgeois" whether they like it or not, or to entice into their nets snobs in order to open the way for new art. On the contrary: on the general background of "left" tendencies, restless and garbled as an harlequinade, that artist is distinguished by the rare sincerity of her achievements and the thoughtfulness of her researches. One may not share altogether the new theories in painting, one may feel indifferent even hostile towards that young school that styles itself the representative of "objectless" painting, as well as towards all contemporar "isms" in general and yet one cannot help doing justice to Exter's creations.

There was a time when Exter's productions excited a smile or even indignation, but obstinacy and sincerity do conquer. All that she does is done with a maximum of strain on all her physical and mental powers. Even the most "abstract" and purely formal of her researches and her "objectless" pictures, extraordinary experiments in combining one way or the other geometrical surfaces of various colours, are with her spiritualised by the painful burning of her soul.

And yet there is a region in which Alexandra Exter's creative power is of interest not only relatively, i. e. from the standpoint of the spirit that

animates her researches, not only through its experimentalism, but also through its positive and undoubtedly achieved results. That region is the theatre; the stage decorations and costumes which the artist has already materialised in a series of exhibitions on the stages of Moscow theatres. It is true that the artist still earlier had revealed her undoubted decorative gift in works of artistic and industrial character, which from the very beginning with her bore the stamp not of female dilettantism but of serious mastership.

Exter's gifts are compound and manifold. As a woman she gives herself up to the all-absorbing charm of art with passionate enthusiasm. I remember how for whole days she worked during the bombardments of Kieff and Odessa—so frequent in contemporary Russia, the shells hissing and bursting. And the artist shuddered, for what was taking place in the streets troubled her. But life's emotions were overcome by voluntary and very masculine self-discipline in work. Exter being a woman, the "ewig-weibliche" some lyrical and soft element repeatedly has shown itself in her painting, the rhythm of form and the tenderness of colouring softening the abstract rigour of her cubistic constructions. And yet in the last analysis that "ewig-weibliche" submits to the voice of the intellect which ever corrects the work of her inspiration.

And in all that she does one feels the dry<sup>n</sup> brightness of a flame which never dies out but is ever regulated: some peculiar pathos of the mind. In that sense Alexandra Exter is near to some others among the best of Russia's feminine artists: these are few but distinguished by the circumstance that in their creation there was more of masculine originality of force than of sentimentalism so proper to female artists. Such were Madame Polenoff, Madame Yakountchikoff, also Madame Gontcharoff, well known abroad.

And yet in one very essential particular does Alexandra Exter differ from these Russian female artists: with them "manliness" almost becomes "mujikism" — a circumstance partly explicable by their admiration of Russian "primitivism" (icons, popular pictures "prianiks") Madame Exter's creations on the contrary are ennobled by West European culture. The artist has seen much, knows much, has transformed much in herself. She has a Russian soul and an emigrant's psychology is foreign to her, but her internal eyes are ever turned towards the West...



## I.

Exter's determination led her abroad immediately after she had finished Russian artistic provincial school (in Kieff) and her wanderings began in 1907.

Exter did not, it is true, borrow anything from the academic West; her short stay in the Paris Académie de la grande Chaumière ending with a scandal which has now become a general rule for all artists endowed above the average. Caro Delvaille, an old professor and fashionable portrait painter grew indignant when he saw Exter's colouring so unlike the academic prescriptions. But the very atmosphere of Paris as such, with its museums, exhibitions, studios, reviews, books and with that peculiar "Je ne sais quoi" that stamps upon it all artistic spirit that taught her to find her way in the tumultuous streams of contemporary painting and fix upon her own favourable wind.

Exter's example once more reveals to us the part played by Paris as contrasted with the art once played by Rome, that former capital of the world's art. The latter trained whole generations of young painters in the imitation of old masters, whilst Paris made them thirst to be modern at any cost "être de son temps." And it is precisely this aspiration to what is modern to incarnate our taste in arts, our way of feeling the world which is the main nerve of Exter's creations and endows them with peculiar ecstatic acuteness. To breathe modern air, to live in unison with the town, to absorb into oneself the impressions of its ever moving life and of its motionless masses of stone and iron—these are the artist's wishes suggested to her by the internal requirements of her nature. And whatever a production of applied art such as an umbrella or a screen or a design for a book or a picture in a frame, or a theatrical decoration for a play from an epoch long since over, not from our own, — everything with her bears, a modern stamp. The stamp of contemporary psychology complicated as it is and over refined by all the preceding experience of the world's Art, troubled and disorderly. For such is our critical epoch which estimates anew all the treasures of the past, but is still fighting in vain to create new ones: its own treasures, to suit its own tastes.

But this does not mean that Exter's creations are in the power of disorder and chaos, that she is drifting on the waves in our contemporary

ocean. For never has Exter shared the futuristic mentality, never has she sympathised with the revolts of futurism against museums, with its anarchistic denial of discipline and apology for individualism. On the contrary in her development and her aspirations she is most logical. She does not rush about but quietly moves on from one research to another, ever more and more difficult and complicated. She has passed through the same *étapes* which not one of the french masters, not even the most "left" one has avoided. It is characteristic that when that artist apparently so individualistically inclined had opened a school of painting for young people in Kieff, instead of inducing her young pupils to imitate the last deductions of her own art, she taught them to pass successively through the various stages of French painting, training them first on Cézanne and Matisse and only then passing on to cubism. As for herself she began with neo-impressionism that is with purely pictorial researches which through division of colours into their separate elements secured a maximum of light and "airiness" in the colouring. Such were Exters first "natures mortes" and Parisian landscapes followed by large panneaux reproducing the nature of Britany and Switzerland. The artist's decorative tendencies, the care she bestowed on the general impression, on the "ensemble" of the picture are already revealed in those transparent and light-green harmonious productions. Meanwhile however that "ensemble" bore a somewhat illusory and "lacy" character due to the peculiarities of the "pointilistic" way of painting.

But this very tendency to "ensemble" caused the artist to pass from the uniform analytic manner of the neo-impressionists to something more entire. Neo-impressionism which but glides over the surface of things could not satisfy Exter and soon she gave a series of "natures mortes" which were thicker and more expressive, these were flowers full of the same freshness which so much charmed the artist in Van Gogh's pictures.

Hitherto the artist had delighted in pure picturesqueness. But a moment came when the need for more complete perception of the world caused Exter to bestow her attention on another side of art as well: form. It is a most significant fact that when living in Paris, the artist so contemporary in all her feelings was enthusiastic of Poussin's pictures in the Museum and carefully studied their composition. Their preponderance of



Costume sketch  
for  
"Romeo and Julia"  
(1921)





interest in the problem of form in lines and lights and shadows, in the composition at the expense of interest in picturesqueness manifested itself in Exter's Art in 1910. In this very year the Paris young artists formed the cubistic group at the Independents' Exhibition. And so for some time Exter turned away from the polychromy of her former productions in grey in order to devote herself the more passionately to problems of form.

New landscapes of Genoa, Venice, Paris and Moscow belong to this period (1910-12). In her first landscapes (Switzerland and Britany) the world looked like frail lace, here on the contrary it grows condense and heavy under her brush. Reproductions of towns now become combinations of distinct plastic forms: houses, bridges, arches, chimney pipes, even smoke and reflections in the river, form one whole well balanced and closing as oval or rhomb just like some wreath or garland. The soldering which welds up these forms together can be so well felt that it seems that if one form, one link be taken away, all will dissolve and fall to pieces.

A tender and feminine colouring is bound up in a peculiar way with this coherence of composition: a whole scale of colours: ash-colours, steel-colours, silvery-colours greenish and lilac. And in this combination of feminine and thin colourism with "organised" in a masculine way composition does the feature-lie and has already indicated, which is characteristic of the artist's double nature. For that very reason did Exter look so different from other cubists her friends of the Paris and Italian exhibitions in which she began taking part after 1910. On the general background of cubistic painting Exters productions were conspicuous for lack of that geometrical dryness, that "scientific" cold, filling most of the cubistic productions which came from their monotonous and whitish palettes and pedantic splitting up of objects. The cubists have declared war on colours, they admit nothing but a "neutral" lime-grey colouring. As we shall see Exter, however near she is to cubism, has never been able to kill in herself love of bright and rich colours.

Exter's town landscapes show us, so to say, the psychological origin of her cubism. In this city-age, with its distinct and sharp stone and metallic forms, could the artist have remained satisfied with the purely picturesque harmonies which had given contentment to Claude Monet and Pissaro?

No: pure colour illusionism, mere play of light and shadows, mere trembling of the air could not have satisfied one who wanted to be "modern" who dared tear off the veil of accident to the world and master its objective substance. And it was this inquisitiveness of modern consciousness which induced the artist to perceive her surroundings not only visually but through contact, plastically, as if feeling with her eye the dimension of every form and the mutual relations between those forms in space. Hence this tendency to lay stress on the surfaces of objects fading into distance to cut them into facets, to turn into hard and distinct bodies what had seemed to former generations but an apparition, but a picturesque mirage.

The great draughtsman Ingres used to say to his pupils: "Gentlemen, everything has a shape of its own, even smoke." And these words of Ingres reveal to us the apparently-paradoxical bond which exists between contemporary cubism and classicism. When Alexandra Exter was studying Poussin's pictures in the Louvre it was not of course the literary and mythological contents of his productions which attracted her, but the rhythmic equilibrium of the masses (trees, mountains, palaces and human figures) which turned his Italian landscape into architectural and artificial Italian landscapes "paysages composés" into productions of "grand art".

But how shall we reconcile this sympathetic attitude of an artist with a modern nervous system towards this pathos of composition? The only reconciliation possible is the law of contrast. In the artist's soul there always dwells a need for harmony. Contemporary urban civilisation with its dynamic chaos, its perpetuum mobile, its accumulations, collisions and intersections of forms could not but have evoked in the artist the wish to set her own Ego in opposition to all that, her organising and regulating will, so as to be able, even in the face of all that chaos, to exclaim in Faust's words:

Wie alles sich zum Ganzen webt  
Eins in dem andern wirkt und lebt.

To find in empiric reality the hidden laws of rhythm which direct that reality; to reveal them, to make the world more amenable to law, more equilibrated, more "constructed" than it is, such the psychological impulse of contemporary "constructivism" in painting.

And here we have come close to what underlies new art as a new "world perception". One may hold altogether aloof from the excesses of french cubism which reduces all the wealth of the world to combinations of cubes, cones, cylinders and globes and turns the human form itself into a combination of small bricks. And yet one cannot help recognising in it an element of healthy reaction against the "atmospherical character" of all sorts of impressionism in painting. Modern man has wished to overcome the fragmentary character and impressionism of his "world-perception", to attain at any cost generalisation and synthesis, to stand on firmer and more objective ground and to harden his mind. Hence that severity and rigorism of new painting, its "lapidary" style, its sympathies for plastic at the expense of colours. And here too there exists an unexpected bridge which joins contemporary age with the past, cubism with Barocch, Poussin, Greco and farther still Michel-Angelo who used to say that the loftier painting is, the more it approaches sculpture, and Paolo Ucello who fanatically studied man's anatomy and the shape of globes.

This thirst for plastic synthesis is proper to Alexandra Exter more than to anybody else. Her feminine nature instilled with well balanced harmony whilst her half-Greek origin makes this insistence on harmony still more comprehensible and natural. Never did she share the excesses of cubism proclaiming that a picture has any right to exist, that decorativeness is not a superstition, that a picture is an aim in itself.

This fanatical research of synthesis and rhythm, cost what it may, is in a curious and almost paradoxical form expressed in the fact that when teaching children in Odessa, Exter instead of making illustrations for tales caused children from four to eight years old to study schematically the shape and rhythm of flowers scoring extraordinary results.

In Exter the decorative instinct was never silent. And her cubistic pictures ever resemble in composition carpets abundantly and proportionately saturated with form. In them there is no void. Exter views town, landscapes as if from above and then splits them all over the surface of the canvass from top to bottom, playing like Greco with the contrasts of form and colour. Such is her Venice. This is no view of Venice but a

new Venice first dismembered and split into its component forms then reconstructed anew. This is no Baedeker's Venice but Venice's quintessence; its architectural and picturesque "total".

The architect concealed in Exter reveals himself also in an interesting maquette for a theatrical decoration, the subject being a "City", over which she worked in Kieff in 1917. I do not know the name of the play for which this project was prepared, I think this play may not exist at all. It is a narrow accumulation of houses, bridges, staircases, squares, chimney pipes, light advertisements; it is an extract of Americanism, which might well have served as a decoration for some unwritten play of Edgar Poe's expressing a city's horrors and endlessness. At the same time all that awful combination of spirals and squares has been balanced and organised into one unalterable whole stretching upwards like a skyscraper which does not tumble down in spite of all the weight it has to bear.

In the above mentioned maquette Exter used for the first time when painting other material besides colours such as gypsum, tin, paper, fragments of news-papers and play bills. In her pure painting she availed herself of such artificial means but most seldom limiting herself to oil colours. On the other hand in the limits of oil painting she set before herself at once a series of formproblems. It was quite obvious that in limiting her colours - as she did at first - she was acting but provisionally and that her plastic researches were to be followed by researches in colours closely bound up with the study of the nature of colour as well as of its dependence on form.

And this new problem concentrated upon itself the whole of her attention and induced her to renounce straight off all such hints at reality and objectivity as were to be found in her previous creations. Now the artist dives into the pure and cold joys of the abstract work of the eye-as if she were a philosopher or a mathematician who has to deal with the world of pure ideas and thoughts. Then her creative work assumes a completely objectless character, becomes painting "absolute" and "pure", finding justification in itself alone as does music which operates through the magic of sounds only. The artist takes from the material world but what is required for the present stage of her researches. Moved by the



example of Picasso, the author of "musical instruments" she makes a further step – and a much more decisive and uncompromising one – and makes it with a genuinely Russian consistency, following it up to its last logical limits. Picasso had divided his "musical instruments" into variously coloured surfaces whilst still retaining the utilitarian shape of these concrete parts. But Exter goes still further: she breaks off all connection between the surfaces and the objects, she removes from the objects their surfaces and studies them in various combinations as self-sufficing abstract entities. In those geometrical figures of various colour and shape, which now twist like ribbons, now however like aeroplanes, now tumble down across the white canvass what interests Exter's the static or dynamic rhythm of the composition and – at the same time – the "sound" of the colour itself. For Exter always remains a painter. In opposition to suprematism which in its investigations starts from lines drawn as such, she invariably starts from colours. Cézanne used to say: „When there is full sound in the colour, there is full weight in the form“. Such is the indissoluble bond between colour and form in Exter's work too. Her compositions even the most abstract ones, are built up on contrasts between colours and their tones; but her experienced eye detects those contrasts not only in the polarity of "reciprocally complementary colours" which is the substance of impressionist painting but also in altogether new and hitherto unrecognised faculties of colour-dynamic faculties. She detects a new and mysterious life in the fact that colours exist. And in her creations the artist studies colour from the standpoint of its lightness or thickness, its "quietness" or – on the contrary – the motive power hidden in it.

In connection with these studies of line, shape and colour we must mention the artist's obstinate researches in the domain of technics – the manner of painting, what is called „facture“. Exter loves painting as a master-artisan, she therefore loves the very surface of the picture and attempts to achieve the greatest diversity possible. She well remembers Cézanne's advice: „one must be a workman in one's art.“

And as I have already mentioned when speaking of Exter's school in Kieff, she studied with loving humility Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso's „facture“, manner of priming and painting, before elaborating a „facture“ of her own.

And here we have before us a new characteristic feature of modern painting. It is interested in technics in a way altogether different from the past generation of artists. Then technics were thought to be the more perfect, the more they were hidden behind dexterous "trompe l'œil" the more "lively" and „truthful" was the way in which the artist reproduced a delusion of reality. But modern artistic consciousness, in applied art as well as in pure painting, beginning with Cézanne, treats materials and material part with much more respect. A modern artist does not aim at accurate and even painting, nor does he conceal his technics under external dexterity of the hand. On the contrary: in his technics he attempts to make his idea of the nature of the thing he reproduces objective; just as in his form-perception he aimed at making the form without heeding conditions of light and air objective. So does Exter: she aims at being able to make the surface of her picture now flat now granulous and rough, now lime-coloured or shining like enamel, as the colours lightness or heaviness depends upon the way the colour is put on the canvass – and therefore the lightness or heaviness of the whole form.

And so the line valeurs, colour and technics are in Exter's eyes elements internally bound together, whose total sum forms a composition – that superior aim of the artist's researches in painting.

And these "objectless" productions of our artist make a strange and perplexing impression indeed. The spectator's eye used to the world of realities which surrounds us seeks in them first of all human contents or analogies or hints at some concrete images; and is ready to turn away with disappointment from those pictures which represent "nothing". But he can turn away no more, for lo! he is already beginning to feel the cold and pure – as music charms of these soarings and follings of multi-coloured forms in the endless expense of the white canvass. And his eye obeying the artist's rhythm and tempo humble wanders over those unknown labyrinths; it feels attracted by those hot and warm, lemon-and orange coloured surfaces, it vanishes in the intervals and depths which the blue and black volours form, and then it reappears and smoothly glides over white surfaces shining like enamel. These are neither portraits, nor landscapes, nor "natures mortes": it is some transcendental World in

which but pure ideas of painting dwell: the idea of space and depth, the idea of equilibrium and motion.

But for the artist such a world is by no means a "four d'ivoire" to shut herself in from the beautiful earth. On the contrary it is but a workshop and a laboratory, in which through long and painful experiments those results are prepared which are needful in the world below, in the world of human feelings and passions. . . .

## II.

Simultaneously with her labours over the problems of pure painting Exter from 1916 upwards devotes her forces to working in the theatre — to decorations, stage and costumes. During those last years she painted stagedecorations for plays so very different in style as Annenky's "Thamira Kythared", as Shakespeare's "Romeo and Julie", as d'Annunzio's "The Daughter of Iorio", as Wilde's "Salomea".

How shall we reconcile Exter's abstract painting we have just been considering and her "laboratory" fanaticism with practical work in the theatre; with illustrations of historical plays. What have they in common, it would seem? May be it is a tribute paid to fashion, a compromise by that unheard of development of the theatre which characterises Russian life after the Revolution and the present Soviet Republic?

No: all that Exter does, is first of all suggested by the internal logic of her art, by the requirements of her searching nature. Of course what draws her to the theatre is not identical with what attracted the old generation of Russian artists well known under the name of "The World of Art" group. Such were Alexander Benois, Bakst, Debujinsky, Anisfeld, Somoff, Roerich and others. These artists so well known abroad were charmed by the theatre, because under its bewitching shadow they could indulge their love of the past, their dreams as to a restauration of old styles more beautiful than those of our contemporary city life. For to

them the theatre was a kind of shelter from that contemporary life, a shelter leading into "le Roi-Soleil"'s monumental greatness, into the spicy sensuality of the erotic world or the light blue "clair de lune" of that of romance. Of course these Russian artists made an enormous step forward in comparison to that naturalistic artisan-like archaeological and ethnographical "truth" which ruled supreme on the opera and ballet stages of European theatres, for into their decorations they brought the charms of genuine painting and the elegance of graphics. But precisely because they were but painters, they brought about another excess: the prevalence of painting on the stage, the interests of "style" and "colouring" predominating over those of the actors' art, a living man – the actor being turned into a coloured arabesque which dissolved in that general polichromic carnival.

Motives of an altogether different kind drew Exter to the stage. Motives very remote indeed from dreams of a "restoration" but on the contrary dictated by something altogether opposite: the instinct of modern life requiring space wider than a pure picture's frames. For Exter remains a decorator with a modern soul even when illustrating an old Greek or a medieval play – which she does through the crucible of a modern mind.

I have already pointed out, that in contrast to most cubists the feeling of synthesis with Exter has always prevailed over the feeling of analysis, and the general element over dismemberment. The cubists have condemned decorative practical painting to death, have proclaimed a picture which had nothing in common with the remaining part of the wall an aim in itself. On the contrary: Exter had always felt an inclination for decorative problems, for submitting the composition of every work of hers to some closed rhythm and the whole picture to the imaginary ensemble of some imaginary intérieur'a. This tendency to create a peculiar cubistic style expressed itself first of all in the artist's artistic and industrial works which were exhibited in 1912 she then easily and naturally managed to apply the principles of her "pictorial dynamism" to the adornment of embroidered screens, cushions, umbrellas, scarfs and dresses. All these fashionable objects, so often the victims of feminine dilettantism, under Exter's hand became covered with arabesques full of sound and motion, in whose rhythm there dwelt all the acuteness of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hence there





Costume sketch  
for  
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(1921)

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was but one step to theatrical costumes and theatrical work – first the walls of a foyer being painted, then a stage curtain; after which stage decorations were created. And the artist did make such a step in 1916, when the youngest and most progressive of Moscow theatres (Kamerny Theatre) asked her to paint stage decorations for “Thamira Kythared”.

But this does not mean that the artist was attracted to the theatre by the decorations alone. For she was thirsting not only to adorn but also to construct – the difference between these two conceptions being the same as when we speak about decorative and constructive (organic) styles in architecture. As the matter of fact the artist’s will to transcend the limits of painting, the limits of surfaces of two dimensions and give true products of her work, her creation was already noticeable in the production of objects both of an artistic and of an industrial character such as screens and umbrellas. (I have already laid stress on that same psychological nearness of the modern painter to the artisan when speaking of contemporary researches in the domain of “facture”.) But does not after all the whole of cubism as an artistic tendency appear as a – possibly tragic – attempt on the part of painting to overcome its surfacial limits, to conquer the third dimension and equal sculpture?

Well for Exter the theatre became a kind of corrective to these fateful limits of painting. She brought there her thirst after synthesis, – synthesis of line, form and colour, which she had attempted to attain in her abstract “laboratory” pictures. On the stage she brought her thirst for painting over a flat surface but also for creating, producing, constructing, feeling, the joy of touch, an architect’s joy.

She was no lazy decorator making water colour sketches for stage “pavilions” or “peasant” backgrounds: she was a stage worker making with her own hands the maquettes and with her own fingers fixing every detail of the stage box.

And here we clearly see unfolded before us the chief difference between the theatrical sympathies of the artists of the “World of Art” group and Exter’s stage tendencies. To the former the theatre was the realm of colours and delusions; for the latter it was the foundation over which she

was able to erect, be it with the aid of pasteboard and veneer – a building for new forms; where she was able to quench – if only with papier maché and veneer – that very thirst for construction for holding masses in equilibrium and for composition which a pure picture of two dimensions could not satisfy.

Exter has been a novator because of painting stage decorations she has begun to build them up out of simplified forms of three dimensions. This tendency completely coincided with the deduction to which the evolution of theatrical thought tended more and more. Both in Russia and abroad a profound crisis of the art of stage had become manifest. Realism had let it into an impasse. The more a stage decoration painted on cloth recalled reality, the more it shocked even a slightly delicate eye by the glaring inconsistency between a motionless and flat background (over which treacherous shadows invariably fell however well it imitated depth and distance) and the actor's living, moving and round form (i. e. a form of three dimensions). And various revolutionists and reformers of the European theatre had long since been seeking a way out of this impasse. Some sought to replace decorations with "neutral" pieces of cloth, with screens (Gordon Craig, Reinhardt). Some – in returning to the motionless architectural background of the ancient stage (G. Fuchs) etc. The little Moscow Theatre of which Tairoff was the director found with Exter's help the most satisfactory solution of that "accursed stage question", a solution which guaranteed the interests of the theatre.

A stage was wittily observed: "Man does not exist for stage decorations [but decorations exist for Man". But if so, decorations are required on the stage only as far as they are needed to show Man on the stage; as a frame and pedestal for the actor, as a surface for movements of the human body. On the stage there must not be anything superfluous, self sufficient, pleasant by itself, but only what is of importance to the "work" and is required for the play. But as the human body performing on the stage is of three dimensions and round – therefore the decorations too must have three dimensions, must be actually built and coloured, not only painted. Only such plastic decorations containing both lines and dimensions will be in harmony with a human body, its positions and gestures. In such a perfectly unexpected manner has cubism



whilst proclaiming itself painting "pure" and "absolute" found its application at the theatre – even more than this, – has helped the theatre to get rid of the painter's former dictatorship and to feel its importance as a special purely theatrical art – a dynamic art first of all.

Exter's first and at once successful theatrical experience was her work in 1915 over a play of the late Russian artist Innokenty Annensky's "Thamira Kythared" in which an ancient myth is capriciously interwined with acute modern irony. Here for the first time the principle of "plastic decoration" of the landscape, reduced to its simplest forms was attempted on a European stage blue steps of various width, a black conic cypress, golden and black stones and rocks of cubic form. Instead of a painted background a plain piece of cloth was used which admitted light and which through a system invented (by Salzmann) was saturated by a great diversity of tints from bluish and orange opal to purple. Not one of the plastic forms remained unused during the process of the play: bodies of bacchantes writhed on the wide steps, satyrs climbed up the cypresses whilst the majestic and mournful of the hero Kythared harmoniously leant over the stones. His broad and easy gestures as well as the hands of the Bacchantes lifted up in passionate ecstasy corresponded to the plain, severe and majestic verticals of the cypresses nor did the spectator any more grumble that those schematic cypresses looked more like cones than like trees. Artistic truth had triumphed over every day "truth".

Wilde's "Salomea" was a second problem which the Kamerny Theatre set before Exter. Here too the stage decorations were based on an architectural principle, the stage being diagonally divided by two partitions between which there rose a round screw – like staircase which disappeared behind the scenes. But here Exter for the first time applied another innovation derived from "abstract" experiments: the principle of moving scenery – that is pieces of cloth of different colour and shape which moved in every direction in connection with the play's development. Here a whole diapason of possibilities becomes conceivable: In the domain of form we have diagonal cuneiform and rectangular surfaces, in the domain of motion – we have flights, upwards, falls, disruptions, accumulations, inward and upward movements, also side-movements. With such dynamics

of scenery two results are attained. First, given but one architectural skeleton of the "mise en scene", nothing but those coloured curtains indicated with every new act change of place and time. Secondly differences of colour and movement in connection with these pieces of cloth symbolised so to say various psychological moments of the drama. And those moving coloured surfaces acted on the spectator in a purely emotional fashion, like musical accords, like the element of light in its pure form. Of such almost "psycho-physiological" sensual-and moral" action of colour, as a pathological affect Goethe had once thought in his "Farbenlehre" and Delacroix had once assigned the same part to colour when saying that painting was in close affinity with music and mathematics.

And so we have now before us a whole key-board of colours like an orchestra accompanying "Salomea"'s development – from silvery to black – and this on the general background of the red curtain – the "Leit-motiv" of this drama of love and death which ends in the quick fall over murdered Salomea of five cuneiform pieces of black velvet, sharp as the knife edge of a guillotine. If we compare this symbolical mise en scene of "Salomea" with that by Bakst and Ida Rubinstein in Paris, I think that the genuine O. Wilde with his refined style, his "alexandrim" and pre-raphaelism was not in Paris (where Bakst had given a realistic view of Jerusalem in the moonlight and a motionless moon), but rather in Moscow, in that artificial setting of silver gold, black velvet and red and crimson light.....?

Both principles I have indicated: Stage decorations of three dimensions and dynamics of coloured surfaces also found their synthetic application, in a third – and excellent – "Kamerny Theatre" mise en scene: "Romeo and Juliet" (1920–21). Here however there was also another new feature: extension of the stage scenery upwards. For in this play we see quite a series of acute-angled white bridges rising one above the other and joining Montecchi's house to Capuletti's. These bridges together with the floor and Juliet's tower form seven surfaces of different height for the actors play – and through this the whole stage from top to bottom is filled up and vivified with motion. This problem of an extension of the stage upwards had been already examined by our artist in her little

maquettes: The City (already mentioned) and Venice (in the illustrations). In the Venice maquette movements starting from a black dimensional circle crowned with white screw like ladders go along a series of staircases and suspended bridges. The respective colours are white, red and black with intervening vertical surfaces of glass, mirror and tin (the canal).

So in the scene representing the fight between the two families we have a splendid collective effect for the first time ever produced in a theatre; not half the stage only, but the whole of it in all its height is shining with rhythmically moving swords and bright and glittering costumes. A lemon-coloured curtain with a diagonal green stripe across, is stretched between the two houses; and the movements of this curtain and differences of colouring dependent on light, also the falling down of other curtains symbolise changes of acts. Thus a violet curtain separates Juliet's room from the bridges; a rich orange one symbolises the luxury of the dance; as for the last scene of the tragic end it is developing over an imposing crimson background. It ought to be added, that amid this harmony of colours the artist for the first time introduced onto the stage decorations of an altogether new element: bright tin (in the canal scene) which illuminated by white light gave a splendid imitation of shining water — the general impression of medieval harmony being thus still enhanced.

The first maquette of these stage decorations had been conceived more abstract style — in Barocch, style somewhat altered. And such absolute white scenery produced the impression of some cold and virgin kingdom of ice as complicated as Mallarme's Swan. But this project proved too complicated for the stage, and so the artist changed it for the second season (1921), simplifying it and making it more concrete. It is true that, that time also she produced stage decorations which had nothing in common with an archaeological and historical restoration of Verona. But these were saturated with hot flesh and blood. Instead of the white colour there was ochre and sienne which provided colours for the Moncchetti and Capuletti houses, their architecture and proportions suggesting remote and dim reminiscences of medieval Italian miniatures with their semi-byzantine proportions and perspectives. The capacity of the artist here revealed (who but quite recently was ruled by the purely abstract element) to grasp vivid and concrete impressions of medieval Italy — is a new feature and

a new stage in the development of her gift. This capacity to echo the requirements of reality had however already manifested itself in a sphere of Exter's theatrical work we have not yet spoken of in the domain of theatre costumes which here are conspicuous not by magnificence of colour only, but also by acute expressiveness of design. In the creation of costumes Exter undoubtedly has no equals.

### III.

When speaking of Exter's theatrical costumes we must begin a new chapter for that old and antiquated branch of the theatre has been indeed fertilised anew by our artist.

Here too, as in everything Exter does, her culture manifests itself. When importing the modern spirit into the creation of theatrical costumes, she does by no means annul the costumes historical evolution. No: for she knows that an artist must needs study the style and character of every epoch; but on the other hand after such a study she gives something of her own: her own synthetic image, her own idea of the costumes of a certain epoch and of a certain play. To be — complete I must mention that Exter did also work over other intended "mises en scène": D'Annunzio's "Iorio's Daughter", Marinetti's "Electrical dolls", Mordkin's ballet.

"The spectator must be conquered by the convincingness of the performance, must be taken hold of by the artist's idea and must not discuss whether this or that is historically true and has been reproduced according to documentary evidence". So our artist formulates the aims of costume creation,

This conception of costume is first of all in accordance with the fundamental principle of our artist's stage decorations: the three dimensions. Here we are in the region of "reciprocal obligation". Decorations of three dimensions with surfaces plastically shown correspond to the roundness of the human body. Thus even in "Thamira Kythared" where



the Kamerny theatre courageously exhibited nudity, according to Exter's suggestion lines were drawn on the bodies of the Bacchantes and Satyrs to bring into relief the fundamental muscles and lines. But here the costume question had been solved in a half - two dimensional sense, as bas relief. Later on in connection with "dressed up" mises en scene the problem grew still clearer. For if dressed in soft material the body may lose its plasticity. Therefore in the interests of plastical harmony on the stage - in that realm of conventionalities - we must needs exaggerate the three dimensional character of the human form itself. Such is the first new acquisition of the Exter costumes: everyone of them is conceived by the artist as a three dimensional and plastically hard whole, as a living and moving relief, as living coloured sculpture. There costumes are not soft mere tissues clothing the actor's body, dependent on his individual form and fluttering in connection with his individual movements; here all has been determined by the artist beforehand: the costume's general contour, the dimensions, the folds. Such a plasticity is attained by the costume being painted over the folds, being intensified with paint whilst the main lines are obtained with the aid of wires or lining.

The Exter costumes are neither "designed" nor "sewn" but constructed: built up out of different surfaces just as her stage decorations. But by what is this or that "construction" of the costume conditioned? By its character, as required by the play and as assimilated by the artist in her own fashion. When dressing a man not only does Exter take into consideration the organic and constructive lines of the human form (such as the lines of the thighs or shoulders): she at times deforms that form in the interests of characterisation, so as to make more prominent the stamp of a given epoch. Her costumes are conceived by her maquillage of the body, as a mask covering the figure; every costume is conceived as one whole, from the head (at times even from a feather in the headgear) to the heels, nothing being left to chance or to a caprice of the dressmaker or the actor. Here everything has been determined beforehand by the artist's will; and together with the stage manager she creates a firm design of the role - its skeleton and colouring. For in the Exter costume's the shape the colour and even some materials mutually supplementing each other are contributing to the same end: a maximum of expressiveness. In full accordance with the conclusions of

her "laboratory" and "tacture" investigations not only does our artist paint the costumes in various colours but also introduces into them different materials which are varied in connection with the need for one or other impression such as heaviness or lightness, brightness or dullness (thus linen, silk and velvet are used in one and the same costume).

The character of an epoch or of a man manifests itself clearest of all in the movements. Here is another feature of Alexandra Exter's costume aesthetics: her costumes are almost always conceived dynamically. The artist has thoroughly studied the history of dress and every day life and knows that every epoch had its own peculiar way of walking, standing and sitting, that a costume was ever a *sui generis* accompaniment of the gestures. And so when creating a costume the artist starts from the stage movements which predominates in the actor, from his rhythm and his tempo – as harmonised with the general rhythm and tempo of the whole play. The Exter costumes are therefore human rhythms petrified in lines and colours. When movements differ, costumes differ also both in their construction and in their colours. This "dynamic" impression is attained in three ways: with the brush, which, as in "Salomea", intensifies in the folds the rhythm of the moving tissues with different materials, (thus pieces of velvet in a costume produce the impression of slowness, whilst silk that of lightness – and acceleration) and – at last – with variations in colour (which may either soften or on the contrary through contrast intensify the acuteness of a gesture). Not a less important element of "motion" are the ornaments which cover the Exter costumes; these are in purposely too big fragments and thus contrast with the general rhythm of the costume and by so doing intensify that rhythm.

Such are the fundamental laws of that new "plastic" theory of the theatre costume. Everything in it is artificial, designed underlined, composed out of various materials, but through that artificial character the maximum of vividness, of expressiveness, of theatrical impression is obtained.

If from these general remarks we pass on to Exter's theatre wardrobe, a bewildering diversity of images will unfold itself before us, a whole gallery of characters and feelings, now tender as lyrics, now intense so as to be grotesque. Here are the Salomea costumes, Herod's and



Costume sketches  
for  
"The modern Chlestakoff"  
(1921)





Herodiad's ponderous and magnificent vestments with monumental head gears and trains, foreign to the common place exotics of the East, but on the other hand filled with the "anachronistic" luxury of the Mysteries; here is Salomeas silvery and blue costume, severe and almost prickly over the main lines, which seems to reflect all her cruel, acute, impatient virgin sensuality. Here are the Romeo and Juliet costumes built up on the same leitmotiv: a Barocch undulating line finishing as a spiral of feathers on the head gears and mantles on the shoulders. Here are the tender and noble costume of the "eternal lovers" Romeos is crimson and Juliets lemon and rose-coloured; and in opposition to them here are the luxurious, magnificent, bright and grotesquely exaggerated costumes of all the other personages who were witness to that "sad tale". And here are the modern masks of an harlequinade making irruption into the old tale, with coloured tongues sharp as flame: this was the manager's idea for he wished to show the extemporal and eternal meaning of the Shakespeare tragedy. This interest felt by our artist in the expressiveness of the human form, which unexpectedly manifested itself in the process of her theatrical work (whilst in her other creations she avoids that human form altogether) has found other points of application besides the Kamerny Theatre masks. Exter prepared a series of costumes for mises en scene of the Moscow Artistic Theatre and its studios. Such are first of all some marvellous costumes for Cervantes' plays. In those spanish costumes of Exter's there is neither Zuloaga nor Anglada, — couleur locale is in them understood and transmuted in Exter's own fashion. Our artist felt Spain to be a country in which monumental pathos is intertwined with almost grotesque expressiveness of character; and her sharp and gigantic hats and collars truly remind us of the condensed acuteness and intense tempo of the "sword and mantle" plays.

Still more unexpectedly was Exter captivated by the expressiveness of Russian old and inert life. Her projects of costumes for Soukhovo-Kobylin's play "Tarelkin's death" are in absolute contrast with the Spanish ones; everything here is "Statical", stubby, heavy and caricature-like. But the artist was able to make this caricature on the ugliness of Russian life partake of the artistic acuteness of Hofmann's and to that flabby Russian "Hoffmanism" she gave a form almost sculptural and almost monumental on account of its linear distinctness. Exter found a statuary and plastic

schema where before her other artists and decorators had seen but the realm of a medley of colours and designs (Custodis, Ewon); she even attempted to discover some lofty pathetic style in the ugly life of old Russia. Her projects of costumes for "Tarelkin's Death" look like projects of monuments.

So paradoxically manifests itself every — where-whether in abstract coloured surfaces, in the East, in Italy and Russia, in the 15th century or in modern life — thirst for synthesis, order and style with which Exter was filled.

\*            \*            \*

As we see Exter's activity runs in two directions; in the region of pure artistic thought striving to solve formal problems of painting (form, colour, composition) and in the domain of concrete application of her "laboratory" achievements to modern stage-art (stage decorations and costumes) before which she opened many new artistic possibilities. Such is her parallel work in the "transcendental sphere" of pure painting and on practical earthly ground; however even here, on this earth, under the theatre roof, Exter does not work as a "stylisator" but as a creator, transmuting in a new fashion the elements of old styles.

But the theatre obviously cannot be the artist's final aim, for stage art which gives so much joy to us spectators of to-day is from the standpoint of eternity ephemeral, temporary and sham; it does nothing but replace a picture on the canvass with one on the stage. And one would like to believe that the time will come for Exter to unite both lines of her activity, the pure and the practical one into one; that she will then avail herself of her "laboratory" achievements to create "pictures" in the authentic sense of the word, in Poussin's sense — which picture will be the crowning of her synthetic flights upwards.

Alexandra Exter has already done much; she has behind her a record full of creative efforts and of a rare capacity for working; she already has disciples (especially in the theatrical domain). And yet the whole of

her is in the future. She is one of those natures who might say of herself in Faust's words: "I am man, rest is unknown to me". She will never pause in her development; she will ever prefer aspiration to possession, searching to attaining.

In this sense Alexandra Exter does not only interest us as an individuality, but also as a symbol, as expressing contemporary art in general-contemporary and European art with all its tragical sufferings, profound investigations and cherished dreams. In this woman's personality as in a focus does our culture reflect itself - our critical culture, balancing on the sharp edge of two epochs.

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IV



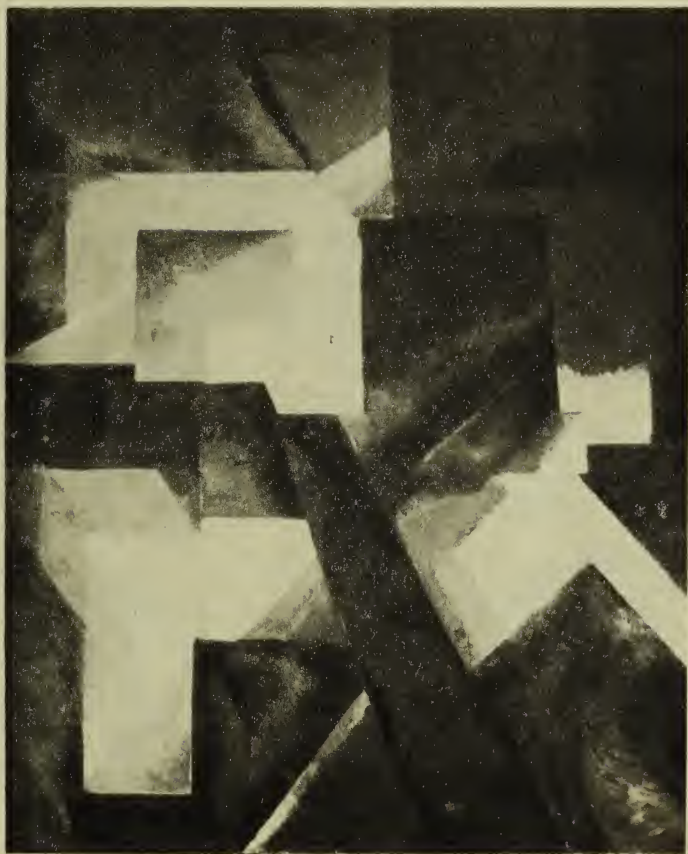
















VIII











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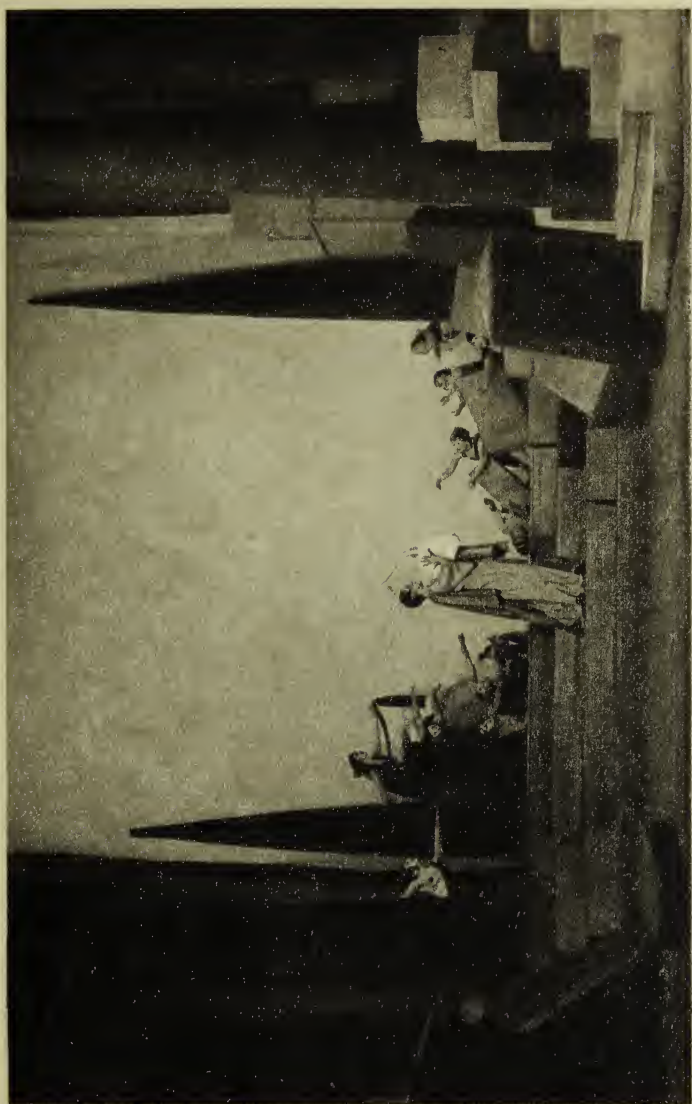












XIV



























































































XXXIII



















XXXXVII





XXXXIII













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